

AERO SCOUT MISSIONS KEEP MARINES ON THE MOVE

By Cpl. Ryan C. Heiser and LCpl. Jessica N. Aranda



In 2007 the Marine Corps launched a unique mission in the ever evolving task of aerial reconnaissance to patrol the far reaching desert of Al Anbar Province, Iraq. The new Aero Scout missions merge the air and ground combat elements to search for, assess, and immediately respond to suspicious activities across the Multi National Forces West area of operations, which includes the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah.

“We’re keeping our eyes on vast areas and maintaining an awareness of what’s out there,”

Capt. William Boulware, a pilot with Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron (HMH) 361, said. “We’re multiplying the capabilities of the ground combat element by stretching their legs to places they normally don’t patrol.”

The air element of Aero Scout missions typically consists of rotary-wing, fixed-wing, and even tiltrotor aircraft. The F/A-18 Hornets fly

HM2 Jason S. Gamble watches over RCT-2 Aero Scout team members in Al Anbar Province, Iraq. Photo by Cpl. Ryan C. Heiser.





An AH-1W Super Cobra with HMLA-773 banks while flying in formation with other Marine Corps aircraft during an Aero Scout mission in Al Anbar Province, Iraq. Photo by Cpl. Cory Moore.

above the helicopters, scouting out the areas to obtain situational awareness. A UH-1N Huey and an AH-1W Super Cobra provide armed reconnaissance and communicate with CH-53E Super Stallions, which fly at the rear of the formation with troops on board. These formations have also included MV-22B Ospreys from VMM-263, which arrived in Iraq in October 2007.

Aero Scout missions offer a proactive approach to reconnaissance, providing fast reaction times without risking ground troops traveling on dangerous roads. “We look for anything out of the ordinary,” Maj. Keith Pierce, a UH-1N pilot with Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron (HMLA) 773, said. “The beauty of the mission is the aviation and ground elements develop a collective intuition. Once we spot a suspicious area, we relay the information to the ground commander, who forms an opinion on whether to land or not.”

The ground commander, his platoon of infantrymen, Iraqi security forces, and translators travel aboard the Super Stallions, prepared to investigate an area upon landing. When the ground commander makes a decision to land, the troops disembark, set up security, and begin their assessments. During this time the Huey and Super Cobra provide close air support to the Marines on the ground or seize the opportunity to refuel.

“We are a reconnaissance asset,” said Maj. Robert B. Brodie, an Aero Scout mission commander with Regimental Combat Team (RCT) 2 in Al Anbar Province. The Marines of RCT-2, based at Camp Lejeune, N.C., served 13 months in western Iraq. RTC-5 relieved them there on 22 January. “Recon slash interdiction and disruption, that’s what we do. It comes down to economy of force. We enable the regimental commander to have a force that can do recon and show a presence across his entire area of operation.”

While Aero Scout missions have led to the confiscation of approximately 8,000 pounds of homemade explosives, the detainment of insurgents and oil smugglers, and the destruction of improvised explosive device factories and insurgent training camps, they are



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Above, Marines with RCT-5 inspect tents and vehicles belonging to the nomadic Bedouins near Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, as part of an Aero Scout mission on 13 February. Photo by LCpl. Jessica N. Aranda. Below, RCT-2's Aero Scout team stands in front of a CH-53E Super Stallion in Al Anbar Province, Iraq, on 11 November 2007. Photo by Cpl. Ryan C. Heiser.





Above, members of RCT-5 hustle to board their CH-53E Super Stallion after inspecting a fishing camp in Al Anbar Province on 17 February. Photo by LCpl. Jessica N. Aranda. Right, a door gunner from HMLA-773 aboard a UH-1N Huey provides close air support for an Aero Scout team on the ground. Photo by Cpl. Cory Moore.

also used to provide food, water, and other daily necessities to the local population. Maj. Brodie explained that the nomadic Bedouins they frequently encounter do not have the luxuries or communication assets available to other local villagers. “They don’t get television or radio, so we help them out by providing them with information about what is going on in their country and who the bad guys are. We better enable the overall mission by opening more lines of communication and information sharing.”

Another important element in Aero Scout operations is the incorporation of Iraqi security forces into the mission. The group usually takes a fire team of Iraqi soldiers with them on the helicopters to not only help with communication, but also show the civilians how far the Iraqi security forces have come in their training and dedication.

“This lets the civilians know we are working together to take the weight of safety and security off their shoulders, so they don’t have to worry about getting attacked, because the good guys are watching,” explained Cpl. Kyle D. Christian, a radio operator with RCT-2. “I get to go out and at the end of the day feel like I did something that mattered. It doesn’t make a difference if we rolled up a bad guy, found weapons, or just collected some good intel, in the end it all fits together to help eliminate the threat to the Iraqi people.” ✈️

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